



f BEGINNER'S GUIDE

# PACO PEÑA

Chris Moss looks at the life and music of the man who popularised flamenco – from gigs with Jimi Hendrix in the 60s to his theatrical stage spectaculars of today

ardcore flamenco – whether heard in a Spanish backstreet, at a festival for aficionados or even on FM as you drive through Spain – can be overwhelming. The strangeness inheres not only in the heartfelt wailing, the staccato guitar and the foreign

vocabulary, but also in the holy nature of the flamenco artist's mission: whether guitarist, dancer or *cante jondo* singer, the performer often seems lost in a kind of conversation with the self. While some of the genre's finest exponents – Camarón de la Isla, La Niña de los Peines, Manolo Caracol – stir listeners because

they seem otherworldly in their passions and their performance, a handful of virtuosos have made it their life's aim to translate flamenco, allowing the rest of the world to make some attempt at grasping its power and spirit.

Paco Peña is one of the most admired translators of the form. His shows, while unashamedly populist as well as critically acclaimed, reflect his internationalism. Flamenco was born out of migration, with roots going back to India and the diaspora of Gypsies who travelled across Europe to arrive in Andalusia in the late 18th century. Paco Peña has tapped into and developed this tradition. In 2009 his show *Flamenco Sin Fronteras* explored Spanish migration to the Americas. Described in the *Guardian* as a 'larky fiesta', it saw Peña's troupe sharing the stage with six Venezuelan dancers and musicians. If the concept was earnest – the influence of Spanish dance and

music on Latin American rhythms – its execution was celebratory and irreverent, with catcalls, singing duets and competitive riffs and dance steps. Each tradition flirted, musically speaking, with the audience and the conquest was total.

*Quimeras*, which he premiered at the Edinburgh Festival in 2010, told the story of a group of African migrants who had arrived in Spain looking for work. Peña drew on his own experience of living in Andalusia, a gateway to Europe for many immigrants. Working with African musicians, the fusion this time around was of Spanish and African music and dance; traditional African drums were played alongside flamenco guitar. The *quimera* (chimera) here was Europe. As Peña told one journalist: "Today in Spain we see the tragic side of this migration, with people often drowning or dying on the way. Those who do get here often find violence and discrimination." He says his show was about "evaluating these situations and seeing the ways these people bring their culture with them, and how that enriches ours."

Born Francisco Peña Pérez in Córdoba in 1942, Paco Peña's origins are humble: he began playing the guitar when he was six, growing up in a *casa de vecinos* (tenement) with several families occupying the same house, gathering on the central patio to exchange gossip and for birthdays and funerals. His older brother, Antonio, taught him the guitar, and by the age of nine he was playing live shows. When he was 15 he joined a traditional flamenco group and toured Madrid, Barcelona, Salamanca and other Spanish cities. He was soon recognised as a gifted accompanist.

Seeking new horizons and hoping to improve his opportunities as a soloist, Peña moved to London in 1964 when he was 22 years old. While he honed his guitar style, he absorbed what was happening in pop, rock, folk and jazz. In 1969 he gave his first Wigmore Hall recital and in 1969 participated in the Royal Festival Hall's Guitar-In concert alongside Jimi Hendrix, Bert Jansch and others. He founded his first stage company in 1970 and went on to produce a string of successful shows, many of which brought flamenco together with classical music, as in the groundbreaking *Misa Flamenca* (with the Choir of St Martin-in-the-Fields) in 1991, and in 2004 with his *Requiem for the Earth*.

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Peña's mission. Over the years he has worked with Argentinian guitarist Eduardo Falú, Chile's Inti-Ilumani ensemble and his close friend and London neighbour, classical guitarist John Williams. The venues he has passed through, from Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club to the Royal Albert Hall to Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, reflect his appeal to music-lovers outside the flamenco clique.

Anyone who has stumbled on an improv flamenco gathering in Spain will know that flamenco feeds on and is nourished by a longing for home. For all his travels, Peña has his roots in Córdoba and keeps up a connection with – and a house in – his hometown. "Córdoba is the warm place to which I always return and the platform that launched me onto a wonderful musical journey," he says. In 1981 he founded the Centro Flamenco Paco Peña in the city and from 1980 to 1990 he served as artistic director of the Córdoba International Guitar Festival.

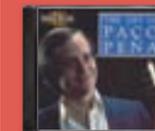
It's this rootedness that has ensured Paco Peña remains a traditionalist as well as an innovator. In the last two decades, flamenco has spun off into many sub-genres, from the urban *jipop flamenkillo* of Ojos de Brujo to Joaquín Cortés's hybrid dance style to the bastardised twiddlings of Rodrigo y Gabriela. Many are illustrations of the old adage '*traduttore, traditore*' ('to translate is to betray'). But Paco Peña has kept his focus firmly on the complex rhythms, meditative delivery and delicate shading of flamenco guitar – every digression, every new departure, forms part of a considered journey back to the origins.

London is full of musicians from Brazil, West Africa and Asia who are unknown or unloved in their homelands. Paco Peña has travelled well, but he has stayed faithful to his instincts. Translation, in his case, has come without the usual betrayals. ■

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## BEST ALBUMS



**The Art of Paco Peña** (Nimbus, 1995)  
A great introduction to Paco Peña's work in a range of flamenco sub-genres, including a couple of foreign excursions to Uruguay for a richly layered *milonga* and River Plate *valse* (waltz).



**Misa Flamenca** (Nimbus, 1991)  
The recording may not be the best, but the concept – a mass for the unholy church of flamenco – and execution are thrilling. One to completely immerse yourself in.



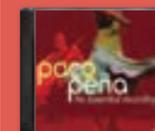
**Fabulous Flamenco!** (Spectrum, 2002)  
This remastered 1975 recording is one of the definitive displays of the technical complexity and emotional power of Peña's flamenco guitar.

## BEST LIVE ALBUM



**Arte y Pasión** (Nimbus, 1999)  
All the energy and exuberance of live flamenco. As you'd expect, there is great guitar work, as well as some fine singing from La Piconera and Antonio Reyes.

## BEST COMPILATION



**Paco Peña: His Essential Recordings, 2 CDs** (Manteca, 2007)  
'Essential' is overstating it a bit, but this album has lots of passion and a fair bit of variety, with tracks from Peña's five Nimbus albums, including seven tracks from *Encuentro* (with guitarist Eduardo Falú).

## LIKE PACO PEÑA? THEN TRY

### CAMARÓN DE LA ISLA



**Soy Gitano** (Polygram 1989)  
Peña has described himself as a "frustrated singer" and Camarón is the voice his guitar yearns to emulate. This album was recorded with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Tomatito, and is said to be the best-selling flamenco album ever. The title-track (a tango) is a sort of arrival, a declaration of intent.